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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on acquainting bilingual educators with one field of special education called learning disabilities. The major dimensions that are discussed are: the learning process with focus on disruptions, the considerations involved in the identification and assessment of learning disabilities, cultural and learning style differences of the bilingual (Latino) individual, treatment and prescription suggestions, and major considerations in differentially diagnosing the presence of learning disibilities within the bilingual individual. It is noted that, in order for the learning disabled individual to have the opportunity to develop potentialities to his fullest and to minimize any dysfunction of perception, cognition, etc., a carefully structured school program and a specially trained teacher are the prime requisites. Priority given in an approach to the education of the learning disabled individual should include the following four basics: (1) control of attention and misdirected activity through a structured environment; (2) building competence through adjusted task and presentation; (3) improvement of deficit functions; (4) mastering of academic skills within the individual's ability range. (Author/AM)

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"Learning Disabilities - They're All Around You"

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Long ago America was founded on democratic principles. One of these principles was, "all men are created equal". By this we do not mean equal in physical, emotional, mental, social or economic sense, but equal in the sense of the worth of the individual and equality of basic inherent rights. Because of this, each school system in America is committed to the principles of education for all regardless of race, culture, creed, or abilities. We, of the democratic belief, must believe that every child is entitled to an education to the limit of his capacity. We must believe that all children are equal in the right to learn if not in the capacity to learn. When we believe these things, we are applying democracy to education.

The basic tenets of public education today are that children should be educated to take their places in society as responsible citizens familiar with their heritage, and should be trained each according to his abilities, to be productive, economically competent members of that society. These over-all aims and objectives are the same for all children in our schools, regardless of their handicapping condition.

Special education programs and services have been developed to assist all individuals who need something in addition to or different from the regular education program. Individuals with special learning problems are in need of "special education" programs and services when they need something in addition to or different from the regular educational offerings. These individuals are probably "normal" in all ways except for their "special" needs area. They may need special education only to the extent of their specific problem areas. They may need certain special techniques and learning environments, teachers, materials and/or methods in teaching. Regardless, they all have the right to educational opportunities of the type necessary to enable them to minimize their limitations and to capitalize upon their capabilities. This point of view then, necessitates the organization of a learning situation which is based on an understanding of individual differences and is structured to meet the specific needs of each child who has unique learning problems. In

structuring special education programs and services, the same general educational objectives for the special child must be present as for the normal child. They are : self realization; human relationship; economic efficiency; civic responsibility. Each of these apply to all educational services to be offered and will differ to the extent that the individual needs of the students differ. One large group of students with special learning problems are titled learning disabilities.

There are many different definitions of learning disabilities, just as there are many types of specific learning disabilities. The definition we prefer is simply: an individual who is not achieving his potential may be a child with a learning disability. His disability becomes very visible when he starts school. He may have difficulty in understanding or using the spoken or written language or writing, spelling, or arithmetic. He may have difficulty in one or more of these areas. His behavior may interfere with his learning, He may be hyperactive, impulsive, distractible, poorly coordinated, withdrawn, immature, or uncooperative. Even with his problems, the learning disabled child is not primarily emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, or physically crippled. Parents and teachers know that: he is not like a blind child, yet he must be taught to see what is important...he is not like a deaf child, yet he must be taught to hear and attend...he is not mentally reatrded, but many factors keep him from learning. He has potential for more success than he attains, but he needs appropriate and timely help. Experience shows that the child who has an early evaluation, correct diagnosis, and a program specifically planned for him, will be helped the most. Without <u>early</u> help he will not reach his potential.

Basically the definition of learning disabilities follows the model of how learning occurs. We learn on the basis of what we receive, called "input"; what we have stored and meaningfully experienced, called "memory and associative thinking"; and we arrive at some form of expression, called "output". Terms like sensation, perception, and cognition become very important in both

learning and learning disabilities. None of them can be separated from functional learning. However, anything that interferes in the process will affect the total learning of the individual. "Process" is the key term in understanding learning and learning disabilities. Certainly bilingual individuals understand the importance of auditory - receptive and verbal - expressive skills. This simply means that if you do not understand what you are receiving, you can not process and respond. Also, you understand the importance of visual reception and visual-motor response. This means that if you do not understand the pictures or symbols you see, you can not process with an appropriate response. Separating the presence of specific learning disabilities and bilingualism is a difficult task. Compounding this situation are the cultural differences which may manifest themselves similarly to non-verbal learning disabilities such as: not knowing what to properly do with an object; responding inappropriately to a visual clue, a verbal clue, or a gesture; being inattentive to verbal reprimands; and having difficulty with some patterns of spatial orientation. Obviously grammatic structure, plural forms, silent consonants, vowel sounds, and auditory-lerceptive skills of the bilingual individual may not be a specific learning disability but might, if truly a process deficit, compound any learning situation for the individual. In order to determine whether a specific learning disability is present within a bilingual individual, a thorough multi-disciplinary procedure in differential diagnosis is required.

Differential diagnosis implies that the assessment will be done by a person who is fluent in the individual's primary language and hopefully by one who is cognizant of his culture. The differential diagnostic procedure will simply result in establishing the first need of the individual - be it bilingual education, learning disabilities assistance, visual impairment, mental retardation, etc. By focussing on the first need, there is a guarantee of proper educational programming. The diagnostic assessment must include: hearing and vision screening to ascertain intact auditory and visual

integrities; assessment of articulation and language processes and levels; perceptual functions; visual-motor skills; adaptive behavior with focus on culture and environment; and achievement levels (functional levels) in reading and math. Although we have some biases with respect to specific diagnostic tools, the important focus is more on the "tester" than the "test". We feel that any person can observe and assess behaviors in any setting by always ascertaining "what is the input?" and "what is the output?". Obviously we must assess both verbal and non-verbal functions to locate the specific abilities and disabilities present. The diagnostic assessment must point the direction to specific educational programming. This is the diagnostic-prescriptive approach. A prescription in programming is possible as a result of the diagnosis. If an individual cannot interpret visual symbols, we must program to assist him by capitalizing upon the stronger modality or by utilizing other sensory inputs. Diagnosis is a means to the end. This implies that by utilizing the information gleaned, educational programming will occur.

In a diagnostic-educational procedure with the bilingual-bicultural child, the following major cultural and linguistic differences must be considered :

1. Language
2. Family Structure
3. Values
4. Learning Styles

To understand the impact of cultural differences, the diagnostician or educator must first have a clear understanding of the meaning of "culture". This refers to the total ways of life of a group of people and includes all distinctively human activities which can be passed on from one generation to the next. These activities include - using a language, running a government, family life, value systems, religious ceremonies, and all of the arts. Every culture has certain differences which make its people unique, but all cultures must have a system of communication which we know as "language".

To say that culture is passed on from one generation to the next does not mean that it is biologically inherited, but that parents pass it on to their children through patterns of language and actions. Animals cannot pass on knowledge from one generation to the next because they do not have a man's capacity to store this knowledge through speech and writing. Probably a child's most important speech model is his mother, and she represents the most beautiful sight in the world to this child. Later on when the child goes to school and uses a wrong verb tense, his teacher scolds him. The teacher is indirectly stepping on "mother's toes", and the child may react strongly to criticism of his mother's teaching, even though he may not realize the reasons behind his reactions. Language is at the center of a child's concept of himself. Our language is our special way of looking at the world. Educators must become more aware of the implications of language learning, so that in the process of molding speech patterns, they do not tear down the child's self-image. A truly bilingual child is one who can understand and communicate in two languages and can function in each language independently of the other. The bilingual child may have equal skills in both languages, but more commonly he is more proficient in one than in the other. Many Latino children come to school: a) knowing a fair amount of English, but being psychologically reluctant to use it; b) knowing little English; c) knowing only Spanish. Educators must take into account the fact that speaking Spanish as a native language causes interference in learning English. Even children who do not speak Spanish at home in many cases may have grown up in an environment of insufficient English and may have modeled their speech patterns on non-standard English. These can all be important factors in achievement on most of our diagnostic instruments. The bilingual-bicultural diagnostician is able to compare and contrast the two language systems and is then better able to distinguish between problems involving linguistic and cultural differences and those involving true learning disabilities.

All minority groups share the common problem of trying to become integrated into society without losing an important sense of identity of culture and tradition which is inherent. All cultures are alike in certain ways, but each is also unique and has unique problems involving the ways they approach the various aspects of the culture. For example, the Mexican culture is predominantly a folk culture where most of the ways of life are learned through the family circle. The Mexican concept of the "family" is much different than that of the Anglo culture. The typical "immediate" family to a Mexican child might include not only parents and siblings, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and god-parents. Many of these relatives may actually live in the same household as the child, or if not, they would still be an integral part of factors involving the child's life and well-being. The father in the household commands respect, and this respect is threatened when he cannot provide enough food for his family. The father's own self concept is very important in holding the family structure together. The Mexican migrant family may instill values in their children that are quite different from those learned by most Anglo educators. Education is valued, but if the choice is between attending school or helping pick vegetables to earn money for tonight's supper, the decision must be directed toward fulfilling the immediate family needs. The particular learning styles that children bring into the classroom are directly related to their cultural upbringing. The Anglo value of individualism clashes with the Mexican value of family solidarity. The Latino culture does not stress independence as the Anglo culture does, and therefore Latino children may be reluctant to try new experiences on their own. Where the Latino culture emphasizes authority, our school systems stress creativity and democratic decision making. Cultural clashes can be found in all aspects of the "non-verbal" language area. We all "speak" with much more than just words - we are constantly communicating by means of non-verbal messages whether we realize it or not. It is estimated that up to eighty per cent of the meaning of human messages is

derived from non-verbal language, which includes our gestures, facial expressions, body posture, allotment of space, regard for time, and all forms of tactile communication. Latinos use gestures much more than do Anglos. Therefore, if the Anglo teacher does not understand the significance of these non-verbal messages, serious problems of cultural misunderstanding can arise. For example, the Anglo child is taught to look directly at the person of authority who is scolding him, but the Mexican child is taught early in life to lower his eyes and look at the floor if he is being reprimanded. For him, looking directly at the adult in this situation would be a sign of disrespect, while to an Anglo child just the opposite would be true. The Anglo teacher who is not aware of this culture difference, could react very negatively toward a child who would not look at the teacher when being scolded. Neither the child nor the teacher would understand the cause of the problem, and this is known as an "unconscious cultural clash". A child learns to handle spacing the way his parents taught him. The Latino culture's concept of space is much closer than the Anglo's, and because of this the Latino child may appear to be intruding on the Anglo's "personal space" when he stands very close to the person he is talking to. Anglos also have a completely different attitude about time than do Latinos. Anglos generally do not expect to be kept waiting, and if they are, this may send a negative message about a person who is late. Latinos, on the other hand, are not slaves to the clock. They view time as the greatest resource in life, and they even have a popular saying, "There's more time than life". The Anglo society values time so much that the children are taught to take "timed-tests". A popular saying in the Anglo culture reflects this value, "Time is money". Another facet of a child's early education involves learning the messages of tactile communication. Each child's impression of what is proper and what is not proper in the area of "touch" stays with him all his life. This "touch" communication differs among cultures too. Latinos are accustomed to much more tactile communication than are Anglos. This tactile area must also be considered in working with Latino children.

A bicultural person is one who is able to function in either of two cultures and can shift from one to the other as he chooses or as the occasion demands. With more and more Latino children in our schools, diagnosticians and educators must do their part in attempting to understand and accept the effects of cultural differences on the learning styles of these children.

Learning disabilities transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. They can occur in children of any cultural background no matter what language they speak. Beyond the usual accepted educational methods and techniques for the Bilingual Education or TESL program, there are specific educational procedures which apply to specific learning disabilities delivery systems. Again each specific learning disabilities individual is different, but specific learning disabilities tend to cluster in common groupings such as: visual-motor problems, verbal problems, and non-verbal problems. The degree of severity of the problem, the age of the individual, the school and home experiences, all will determine in part the educational prescription and treatment. In order for the learning disabilities individual to have the opportunity to develop to his fullest potentialities and to minimize any dysfunction of perception, cognition, et., a carefully structured school program and a specially trained teacher are the prime requisites. The whole program must be based upon giving the individual the opportunity to work at his own level and at his own pace; it must help him to minimize his specific dysfunctions; it must help him to learn how to adjust and structure his behaviors; and it must afford him the opportunity to utilize his assets to their fullest. In summary, priority given in an approach to the education of the learning disabilities individual should include the following four basics:

1. Control of attention and misdirected activity through a structured environment
2. Building competence through adjusted task and presentation
3. Improvement of deficit functions
4. Mastering of academic skills within the individual's ability range.

Each teacher must develop his or her own techniques which will be unique for each individual. What might work for one - might not be effective for another. The educational program for the learning disabilities individual is basically the same as for the "normal" child, except in methodology, the use of techniques, the materials, and the focus, which is on the individual and not on the subject or grade placement. Learning disabilities services are simply process bridges (auditory or visual input and verbal or visual-motor output) in learning. They are specific learning procedures, specific to specific individuals.

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